

THERE'S A REAL MONK LIVING JUST DOWN THE ROAD



His name is Father Martin dePorres and yes, he's a real honest-to-goodness monk from the Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament Monastery.

People ask me all the time, "how do you come up with those people you write about?" Well, sometimes it is simple as taking a different route to a place you've been to many times...like going from Coleman to Mt. Pleasant.

Not long ago, I headed from my home in the general direction (southwest) of Central Michigan University and went down a dirt road that's so dusty you can see a car coming from a mile away. I wasn't in a hurry and it's a good thing because I had to go about 25 mph to avoid holes big enough to swallow my car.

I hadn't been gone too long but far enough to start looking for familiar landmarks. Just when I started thinking 'I don't believe I've been this way before' I came across a sign I'd never seen around these parts. It said Monastery. Now that sounded interesting. And that's how I met Father Martin; a man who knew he wanted to be a priest by age five.

He grew up in Flint, Michigan and through his educational process became quite acquainted with the Saints- Holy Rosary, St. Agnes, St. John, St. Michael...he even worked a St. Joseph Hospital in his youth. Raised a Roman Catholic, Martin knew serving and helping others through religion was his calling.

But by age sixteen, after many hours of conversation with the priests at St. Michael's Byzantine Catholic Church and St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, he switched from west to east and became an Orthodox. "I was never asked to renounce my upbringing," said Martin. "I just felt like I was home."

His schooling took him eventually to Texas where he entered a monastery to become a monk through an Orthodox Monastery.. "I'm mostly of French decent and I don't have a drop of Ukrainian blood in me but I just blame my father for that," he said laughing.

After becoming a full-fledged monk, Father Martin went on a journey of mission work that started in Rochester, New York and would eventually take him to San Diego, California. There he opened Our Lady Fatima Hospitality House for the poor and homeless, which had 14 beds and was always full. This work was inspired by Mother Teresa of Calcutta whom he met in 1989.

"I believe you take care of the body first," said Father Martin. "Then if they want to receive religious orientation, it's up to them. We can't push religion on people; they have to want it before it will work its miracles." His home survived on donations and many times people would leave canned goods as a way to help.

In 1990, he had a heart attack and took a leave of absence from active ministry and Bishop of San Diego. Returning to his mother's home in Skidway Lake, Michigan after a year of recovery, Father Martin felt a need for the establishment of a monastery in Michigan.

Work began on making that dream come true and, through a real estate agent, he signed the purchase agreement on 37 acres in Denver Township in Isabella County. In November of 1997 the Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament Monastery opened. After extensive remodeling, the Monastery now has a sanctuary and two rooms upstairs for the monks and visiting clergy. Downstairs are three rooms available for six people.

They began taking Community Mental Health clients in 2002 to help make ends meet but that stopped over a year ago primarily due to State budget cuts. Now in a transition period, the Monastery is being set up

to accommodate homeless veterans and veterans returning to civilian life.

Father Martin is not alone in his quest to assist the displaced and needy. Mother Kateri Bertoni, a nun from Alma, makes the trek to Sunday Mass and is very involved in the operation of the entire facility. It is her hope to someday establish a house for homeless women on the grounds.

As I ventured down that dusty road to the Monastery I was greeted by Spud (the resident terrier) and out stepped a smiling figure in his humble and elegantly simple robe – my first encounter with a real monk.

ROR: So how does one become a monk and do you take vows?

Father Martin: Well, first you have to be accepted into a monastery. Mine was in Leander, TX. You need to have a serving heart; it's not an easy career choice. And yes, we take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

ROR: So monks never marry?

Father Martin: In the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the monastics (monks and nuns) take the vow of chastity. There are married monastics living on the grounds of the New Skete Russian Orthodox monastery in New York and I'm not sure how that works (laughing). So someday it may change in our church as well.

ROR: How do people react in public when they see you in your robe?

Father Martin: Some people will recognize me as a priest and want to tell me their problems. If it's around Halloween, I get a lot of compliments on having a great costume (laughing). But if I'm sitting on a bus or most anywhere, ultimately someone will sit next to me who needs to talk. God keeps that seat available for the right person.

ROR: Do you get nervous when you have to speak or preach?

Father Martin: I used to get very nervous but if I know two people in the crowd, I can look at them on occasion and it calms me. I let the Holy Spirit guide me when I speak and nine out of ten times it works. On the tenth time, He gives me humility.

ROR: Do you have any favorite passages in the Bible and a favorite Biblical person?

Father Martin: Come to me all who are weary and burdened (Matthew 11:28) and a quote we hear quite often these days, “what so ever you do to the least of my brothers you do unto me.” Well, Jesus Christ and our blessed Mother are the two obvious favorites (laughing) but I would also add Isaiah in the Old Testament because in his prophecies he speaks of the coming of the Messiah.

ROR: Is there an interesting or funny thing that’s happened to you from the pulpit?

Father Martin: I have a few health challenges and my memory isn’t as good as it should be but one time I was in the middle of a mass and all of a sudden my mind went completely blank. So I just looked up and said ‘that’s all folks!’ I generally take things very seriously but I believe in a laughing Jesus and he was laughing with me that day.

ROR: What is your favorite part of being a monk and the worst part?

Father Martin: The favorite part is my personal fellowship with God and being with the people we’re trying to help. The worst part is trying to hold it all together financially.

ROR: If you could sit down with a Jew and a Muslim, what would you ask them?

Father Martin: I would ask them if I could come to the Synagogue and to the Temple so I could better understand their points of view. The east and west have to come to an understanding for us to survive.

ROR: Do you have any guilty pleasures?

Father Martin: TV...I watch too much; American Idol and V but I also watch the Catholic and Trinity Networks. I love to watch movies too, so I belong to Netflix.

ROR: What word best describes you?

Father Martin: I don’t want this to come out sounding like I’m bragging but I guess I would use the word caring.

ROR: Father, I can’t think of a better word myself. Thank you for sharing your life and the monastery with us.